# ENGAGING OPPY'S METAPHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

## Arguments, Worldviews, and Disagreement

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# ABSTRACT

This thesis engages Graham Oppy's metaphilosophy of religion – which includes his theories of argumentation, epistemic justification, and the epistemology of disagreement – developing a critique and proposing an alternative. Chapter I presents Oppy's views and his main reasons in their favor. Chapter II argues that Oppy is committed to two claims – that only truth-conducive reasons can justify philosophical belief and that such justification depends entirely on one's judgments about the theoretical virtues of comprehensive worldviews – that jointly entail that philosophical beliefs cannot be justified. It also argues that it is the latter of these two claims that should be abandoned, which implies accepting some version of foundationalism. Chapter III develops a kind of foundationalism – a version of phenomenal conservatism – that vindicates the goodness of arguments *contra* Oppy, allows for plenty of *prima facie* justified philosophical beliefs, but sanctions steadfastness in the face of widespread expert and peer disagreement only for relatively special kinds of philosophical theses – ones that, in effect, question the neutrality of reason with respect to the discovery of truth in the given domain.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

# INTRODUCTION

Contemporary analytic philosophy of religion has at least two interesting features. The first is that it is thriving – a marked change in comparison to its condition in the middle of the previous century, in large part attributable to the (by some) oft-celebrated successes of a handful of ambitious English-speaking philosophers in the 1960's and subsequent decades.

Its other peculiar feature is that it is chock full of arguments. Setting aside obvious challenges in categorization, McIntosh catalogues about one hundred arguments for the existence of God published recently in mainstream venues.[1] These arguments generally consist of a few premises, often involving taking a stance on a philosophical controversy, and then arguing that the preferred position entails or at least favors theism over atheism or naturalism. Such intense focus on developing arguments is unusual in the analytic landscape and is perhaps inspired by the tradition of proposing theistic argument that goes back at least to Thomas Aquinas. (There are fewer arguments for atheism, though they are no less influential.)

When it comes to the role such arguments should play, there is a divide between two camps which Climenhaga (2019, 3) – rightly or wrongly – characterizes as internalist and externalist. The internalist approach, influentially developed by Richard Swinburne, takes these arguments to convey evidence, and holds that the justification of theistic and atheistic belief depends on where one's total evidence leads. Externalists like Alvin Plantinga, on the other hand, often take an "innocent until proven guilty" approach to beliefs and understand these arguments as attempted proofs of guilt, potential ways of defeating belief in the conclusion's denial.

Graham Oppy, Professor of Philosophy at Monash University, Australia, is an influential advocate and refiner of the internalist approach. He contends that arguments understood as logical derivations from premises *cannot* establish their conclusions and develops a kind of worldview comparison as an alternative. This thesis provides a critique of his proposal, identifying as its main weakness not internalism but coherentism. It also puts forward an alternative – a version of modest internalist foundationalism that, in order to be resilient against the problems raised by disagreement, permits steadfast belief in only those philosophical views which imply special claims about epistemic competences.

The body of the thesis consists of three chapters. Chapter I outlines Oppy's views on what's wrong with arguments, how worldview comparison works, and the epistemological foundations and ramifications. Chapter II argues that Oppy faces a dilemma because he is committed to two

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[1] https://www.camcintosh.com/theistic/index.html

epistemological theses that jointly imply unacceptable consequences and argues that one is easier rejected than the other. Chapter III outlines the implications of rejecting what I call thoroughgoing coherentism and develops a version of modest foundationalism that turns out largely to vindicate arguments, but only given certain special resources for discounting disagreement. The conclusion recapitulates my argument and situates it in broader discussions.

# I. OPPY'S CASE

In this chapter, I expound on Oppy's views: first, about his misgivings with arguments or "derivations"; second, about his proposals concerning worldview elucidation and evaluation; and third, about the epistemological questions of justification and disagreement.

## I.1. Against derivations

Oppy's paper "What derivations cannot do" (2015) starts with the following words:

> Here is one standard format for a paper in philosophy of religion. (1) Provide some introductory remarks that form the background to the subsequent discussion. (2) State an argument – either with the conclusion that God exists, or the conclusion that God does not exist – in standard form. (3) Give a derivation which establishes that the conclusion of the argument is appropriately related to the premises. (4) Defend the premises of the argument, making more or less frequent appeal to the fact that the premises seem reasonable to the author. (5) Respond to objections, including, in particular, the charge that your argument is question-begging. (6) Conclude that your argument is a good or successful argument for its conclusion.
>
> No paper that conforms to this format should ever see the light of day. (Oppy 2015, 327)

Something must be very wrong with these arguments. What is it? The problem, Oppy argues, is that there is a mismatch between the way arguments work and what they are supposed to achieve. The goal of arguments, for Oppy, is "bring[ing] about reasonable belief revision":

> a good argument is one that succeeds – or perhaps would or ought to succeed – in bringing about reasonable belief revision in reasonable targets. The most successful argument would be one that succeeds – or perhaps would or ought to succeed – in persuading any reasonable person to accept its conclusion; good, but less successful arguments would be ones that succeed – or perhaps would or ought to succeed – in persuading a non-zero percentage of reasonable people to accept their conclusions. (Oppy 2006, 10)

But the evaluation of arguments always happens against the background of one's other beliefs (Oppy 2006, 8–10), which is the source of Oppy's main problem with them. Distinguish two kinds of arguments: deductive and non-deductive. Deductive arguments consist of a series of premises, from which a conclusion can be derived: $p_1, p_2, \ldots p_n \vDash c$. With Oppy, I will sometimes call deductive arguments "derivations." Non-deductive arguments can also be seen as having a series of premises, but those, rather than entailing the conclusion, render it probable or reasonably acceptable: "it is reasonable – perhaps even most reasonable – to accept the conclusion of the argument on the basis of the premises" (2006, 10). We set aside non-deductive arguments for now, though it seems that Oppy's analysis applies to them equally.

The goal of an argument for *c* then is to get the person who antecedently rejects *c* reasonably to change her mind. Here Oppy introduces a dilemma: does she antecedently accept all of the argument's premises? If the answer is negative, then she will not be moved by the argument, and she need not be – no rational belief revision ensues. If she *does* accept the premises, then rational belief revision may occur (whether she rejects one of the premises or affirms the conclusion depends on further factors), but then the argument amounts to the mere demonstration of an internal inconsistency among her views.

One further consideration needs to be added to render the dilemma as worrisome as Oppy sees it. For any interesting and controversial proposition *p*, one can consistently reject at least one premise in every argument for *p* – which is just to say that interesting and controversial propositions are not tautologies. If they were, or if at least many philosophers suspected that they might be, we'd expect philosophy papers to contain logical derivations of comparable complexity to those found in mathematics papers – but they don't (Oppy 2011, 9).

From these considerations it follows that derivations can never bring about reasonable belief revision in people who have and can maintain a consistent set of positions – with Oppy's slight overstatement, if they are "perfectly rational" (Oppy 2006, 13). It is difficult to see, then, how we could look to arguments to help us decide whether some interesting and controversial proposition *p* is *true*. The most they could do is tell us whether our other beliefs entail it, yet with the full knowledge that others might reject those of our beliefs which serve as premises – and in the case of philosophy, we will often be unable to point to anything unreasonable in their doing so.

## I.2. For worldview comparison

Thankfully, Oppy does not leave us entirely in this pessimistic situation. He proposes an alternative approach to deciding whether some proposition is true: worldview comparison (e.g., Oppy 2016, 24–28; 2017; 2018, 17–21). This approach comes in two parts: worldview elucidation and worldview evaluation. In the following, I summarize the two.

### I.2.1. Worldview elucidation

Take a proposition in whose truth one is interested: *p*. The goal of worldview elucidation is to extend *p* into a theory by adding to it other propositions relevant for assessing the truth of *p*; propositions that show up in arguments for *p*, and – more importantly – the negations of propositions that show up in arguments *against p*.

How expansive should such a theory be? Oppy is a bit ambiguous.[2] Perhaps he means to distinguish between two notions of worldview: an idealized and a practical notion. A worldview in the *idealized* sense would be a complete theory that takes positions on every interesting question in philosophy, science, and the humanities. It seems unlikely that we will ever develop a worldview in that sense. A worldview in the *practical* sense, on the other hand, is a theory that affirms or rejects a controversial claim $p$ and takes positions on many issues relevant to assessing $p$.

Assuming, then, that one wishes to evaluate the proposition *God exists*, one might extend this proposition into a theory by taking positions on issues like the possibility of infinite causal regress, the existence of moral truths independent of human evaluation, whether some things are contingent, what God's omniscience is supposed to involve, and whether the historical narratives found in religious scriptures can be trusted.

Worldviews built around some $p$ can be quite diverse, both with respect to their extent and to their content: some $p$-worldviews do not take a position on whether $q$, others affirm $q$, and yet others deny it. (If we are to take the idealized sense of complete worldviews as fundamental – as Oppy seems to suggest (2017, 178) – $p$-worldviews that do not take a position on whether $q$ should be seen as ambiguous or undecided between two comprehensive $p$-worldviews, one of which affirms $q$, the other of which denies it.) To find the truth about $p$ – says Oppy – we need to find the best $p$-worldview and compare it with the best $\sim p$-worldview. Both steps require a way to evaluate or compare worldviews. This is what we turn to now.

## I.2.2. Worldview evaluation

Oppy proposes a two-step process for evaluating worldviews. First, one assesses the internal consistency of a single worldview: if it entails contradictions, it must be rejected or revised

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[2] Oppy's publications vary significantly with respect to terminology. Oppy (2015, 325) mentions "worldview" only in passing and focuses on "best theories," which for comparative purposes should be "worked out to the same level of detail." Oppy (2016, 24) only talks about worldviews, and distinguishes the idealized comprehensive conception from the more realistic partial one, but introduces no corresponding terminology. Oppy (2017, 181) defines worldviews about $p$ as large "theories" including "all of the propositions that are relevant to p" and "contain[ing] nothing but" such claims; not having a position on a relevant claim is modeled as being undecided between two worldviews (178). Oppy (2018, 17) treats "worldview" and "big picture" as synonyms, and the comprehensive and approximate senses are not distinguished terminologically: he calls them "theories of everything," but at the same time acknowledges that the ones we have are "radically incomplete." Oppy (2020, 11) only uses the phrase "theories of everything." Perhaps some of these tensions are resolved in the following paragraph:

> If best worldviews are theories of everything, then we cannot make them fully explicit; even if best worldviews are merely our best current approximations to theories of everything, we cannot make them fully explicit. … The best we can do, it seems, is to put together theories that address everything that is currently taken to be relevant to the question whether there are gods: if the claim that p is relevant to the question whether there are gods, then exactly one of p and ~p is included – perhaps by entailment – in each fully articulated worldview. (Oppy 2019b, 3–4)

(except, I suppose, if it endorses a paraconsistent logic).[3] This may not be trivial, as illustrated by mathematical research, where the search for logical entailments quickly becomes difficult to follow for the layperson. However (as mentioned in Section I.1.), Oppy points out that philosophy of religion papers are *not* like mathematical papers: the former typically feature just a handful of premises and simple rules of inference that rarely exceed the complexities of quantified modal logic. This is arguably evidence that the best theistic and atheistic worldviews on the philosophical market today are usually thought to pass the internal consistency test. On the other hand, ontological arguments for God and atheistic arguments from the incoherence of divine attributes do seem to belong to this first step; but it is true that they aren't the most popular arguments today.

The second step in Oppy's process is a pairwise comparison of worldviews. Whenever comparing two worldviews, we split them into *data* and *theory*. Plainly, the data are what they agree on, and the two theories are what's left. When comparing two $p$-worldviews, $p$ is a datum and the theories are other details of $p$-worldviews; when comparing a $p$-worldview and a $\sim p$-worldview, $p$ and $\sim p$ end up in the opposing theories.

Equipped with two theories and a data set, one moves on to the assessment of the theories with respect to *theoretical virtues*. There are two of these: minimizing theoretical commitment and maximizing explanatory breadth and depth. These roughly correspond, respectively, to the prior probability of the theory and the conditional probability of the data on the theory. As Oppy points out, these two virtues often point in opposite directions: the more one packs into the theory, the more it can predict and thus explain, but the less economic it becomes. It follows that we need tradeoffs, but these will inevitably be contentious; therefore – says Oppy – we should expect plenty of rational "agreeing to disagree" concerning judgments of worldview superiority (cf. Oppy 2016, 47).

Nevertheless, our best shot at assessing whether God exists is to develop the best theistic and atheistic worldviews we can (by developing many and comparing them), and then evaluating the finalists against said virtues. For Oppy, the winner is a version of atheism (2018, 48).

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[3] Since there are both deductive and non-deductive arguments, and consistency belongs to the domain of the deductive, one might wonder whether there is a corresponding internal test related to non-deductive arguments – something about probabilistic coherence. It seems to me that failures in probabilistic coherence will surface in the second step of worldview evaluation, pairwise comparison, as poverty in either explanatory power or theoretical simplicity.

## I.3. From method to epistemology

The previous section laid out how Oppy thinks we should go about assessing the existence of God in particular, and philosophical claims in general. In this section, I'll briefly examine Oppy's – closely related – epistemological views about rational justification and disagreement with respect to such claims.

## I.3.1. Rational justification

As we have seen, Oppy thinks that the failure of arguments to bring about a consensus prohibits us from judging them as successful. What then, one wonders, is the standard of justification that Oppy's takes his atheistic belief to meet? He proposes the following answer:

> Some people claim that, in order to have a justified belief on a controversial philosophical question, you need to have an argument: that is, you need to have a derivation of your controversial philosophical opinion from other (perhaps less controversial) claims that you accept. It should be obvious by now why I am inclined to suspect that this kind of claim is seriously mistaken. In order to have a justified belief on a controversial philosophical opinion, you ought to have developed a best theory that embeds the belief in question, and you ought to have satisfied yourself that that best theory is not trumped by an extant best theory that embeds the denial of that controversial philosophical belief. But you simply do not need derivations with the controversial philosophical claim as conclusion in order to do these things. (Oppy 2015, 330)

Oppy's criteria for justification of belief in a "controversial philosophical opinion" ($p$) are, then, twofold:

1. Having developed a worldview $W$ that embeds $p$
2. Having satisfied oneself that $W$ is not trumped by any extant $W'$ that embeds $\sim p$

Both reason and a slightly later passage from Oppy (2019a, 127) suggest a stronger alternative for (2):

2'. Having satisfied oneself that $W$ trumps every extant $W'$ that embeds $\sim p$

Since 2' refers to the $W$ introduced in (1), I take it that (1) and (2') can faithfully be combined into the following principle:

> JUSTIFICATION: One's belief in a controversial philosophical opinion $p$ is justified if and only if one has satisfied oneself that a worldview one has developed that embeds $p$ trumps every extant worldview that embeds $\sim p$.

Why "if and only if" – why is this condition both necessary and sufficient? The necessity is shown by Oppy prefacing the two components of the condition with "you ought to". The sufficiency is shown by the following sentence's denial of the necessity of derivations, and the general context where Oppy's point is denying that something beyond worldview comparison is necessary for justified philosophical opinions.

Though I take JUSTIFICATION to be faithful to Oppy's point in the quoted passage, it's not straightforwardly harmonious with some other things he says. Specifically, he is much more lenient about the criteria for rational or epistemic *permissibility* (e.g., Oppy 2019, 11, 13), which, on a deontological conception, coincides with justification. Oppy seems, then, to be committed to some other notion of justification which, judging by JUSTIFICATION, is still internalist. In the broader literature, the most readily available and plausible alternative conception is the one concerning "adequate grounds… sufficiently indicative to the truth of *p*" (Alston 1985, 71).

The upshot is that justification is severed from the norms of belief revision, which Oppy (understandably) takes to correspond to rational permissibility and obligatoriness. If one holds one's belief in a rationally permissible way, then belief revision is not called for – not even suggested. This would mean that one can have beliefs which one has no rational way to improve (including decreasing confidence or suspending belief), yet one knows to be unjustified. (I take up some issues with this account in Section II.1.2.)

## I.3.2. Disagreement

Oppy's most detailed treatment of the topic of the epistemology of disagreement is found in a wide-ranging paper titled "Disagreement" (2010), with further points in later works (mainly Oppy 2011). He contends throughout that most people are rational in retaining their preferred philosophical beliefs in the face of widespread disagreement. It is challenging to summarize his arguments for this view, because rather than developing a single line of thought, he makes many independent points. Here I summarize what I take to be his three central arguments.

First, an argument from the inapplicability of intuitively plausible thought experiments where conciliation seems to be called for (Oppy 2010, 191; 2011, 21–22). Oppy points out that most philosophical opinions are formed as a result of a complex (often inscrutable, partly forgotten, and imperfectly shared) network of reasons, in awareness of disagreement; while in the relevant thought experiments, the agents usually have few reasons with easily isolated sources, and there is a distinct moment when they discover the disagreement. This point does not in itself

establish the permissibility of steadfastness, but aims to undermine much intuitive support against it.

Second, an argument from the non-obligatoriness of belief suspension (Oppy 2010, 192–196). Oppy brings up an example to point out that sometimes one must choose between epistemic policies, one of which yields more belief suspension, the other a greater risk of false beliefs. Oppy claims that there is no clear obligation to adopt the more cautious policy, because the preference between less falsehood and more truth is beyond the domain of epistemology. At least, this is my interpretation of his comment about choosing a policy favoring belief suspension: "Will we be doing better? Well, it seems to me that that depends upon what you care about" (2010, 191).

Third, an argument from the diversity of expert credences (Oppy 2011, 21). On some philosophical matters like the existence of God, one can find experts with doxastic attitudes covering the entire range of confidence from full disbelief to full belief (or minimal to maximal credence or confidence). Therefore, it might seem arbitrary to say that disagreement mandates that people take one specific doxastic attitude toward the claim; whatever their position, they will find themselves in disagreement with most experts. For all these reasons, then, Oppy thinks that it is *permissible* – which, recalling the previous section, may not entail *justified* – for one to stick to one's position in the face of expert and peer controversy.

# II. A DILEMMA FOR OPPY

This chapter argues that Oppy's account of rational justification endorses foundationalist and coherentist elements in an inconsistent way. First, I will argue that Oppy's account commits him to the following two theses:

> *Truth-conducive reasons*: Reasons for belief that aren't truth-conducive can't justify.

> *Thoroughgoing coherentism*: Justification for philosophical opinions depends entirely on one's beliefs about the comparative theoretical virtues of comprehensive worldviews.

Second, I will argue that these two theses jointly imply that there cannot be any justified "philosophical opinions." Third, I will briefly consider what the implications of rejecting either might involve.

## II.1. Exegesis

First, I turn to Oppy's writings to argue that we should take him to be committed to *Truth-conducive reasons* and *Thoroughgoing coherentism*.

### II.1.1. Truth-conducive reasons

I take it that *Truth-conducive reasons* entails that if some claim is to count toward the justification of a belief, that claim has to constitute *pro tanto* reason to think that the given belief is more likely to be true than its negation. There are three lines of evidence for *Truth-conducive reasons* in Oppy's writings.

1. His discussion of pragmatic arguments for religious belief. Oppy denies that pragmatic arguments – arguments that aim to show the *desirability* of theism – can rationally give reason to believe and says that "*beliefs* can only be properly responsive to truth-conducive reasons" (2011, 18) and that "the goal of belief is to track the truth" (2011, 21).

2. His comments on the reasons for (his atheistic) belief. Oppy expresses his preference for atheism in the following way: "when I make the best evaluation that I can of all of the relevant considerations, I come down on the side of the claim that there are no gods" (2018, 48). He also says that "[a]ll minimally rational atheists suppose that best theistic big pictures are inferior to best atheistic big pictures" (2019a, 127). To be a rational atheist, it seems, is to believe that one's reasons favor atheism *over theism*.

3. His analysis of the reasons for steadfastness in disagreement. Oppy seems to agree that a consideration in favor of a view cannot equally support that view's negation when he

argues for steadfastness in disagreement based on one's first-order reasons: "My grounds for believing that I am right and you – my doxastic peer – are wrong are just my grounds for believing as I do" (2010, 198). This clearly assumes that one's grounds for believing as one does are grounds for believing that claims incompatible with one's beliefs are false.

For Oppy himself, then, the grounds or considerations that drive one reasonably to believe a view are grounds or considerations for thinking that the view's negation is false – which is the claim made by *Truth-conducive reasons*.

On the other hand, Oppy gives a story of two judges that seems to point in the contrary direction (2010, 192–193). Here, both judges have a 95% track record of judging some kind of cases correctly. In 90% of the cases, they agree; in 10%, they disagree. Oppy argues that in the controversial 10% of cases, one could be rational (depending on how one favors gaining true beliefs over avoiding false ones) in accepting the verdicts of one judge rather than suspending belief, since the former strategy gets one 5% more truth. If one were to do that, one's reasons for accepting Judge 1's verdict *V* in a controversial case would appear to be that (1) there's a 50% chance that the verdict is correct and that (2) the alternative of belief suspension is unattractive. Neither reason favors *V* over ~*V*, yet Oppy believing *V* on their basis is claimed to be rational.

What should we make of this apparent contradiction? I see two options. The first is to concede the contradiction and argue that the overly permissive part should be rejected. The other is to explore whether I misconstrued something in Oppy's approach. The case of the two judges does seem open to an alternative interpretation (cf. Section I.3.2.). Maybe what rationality is supposed to be permissive toward is the higher-order choice between methods or strategies one of which yields 10% belief suspension and the other 5% truth and 5% falsehood. It could still be true that the first-order reasons on which one bases one's beliefs need to favor those beliefs over their negations; it's just that one's strategy for obtaining and evaluating reasons is not statistically reliable. The more precarious, 5% true / 5% false policy should then still furnish one with plausible-looking reasons to believe those propositions that turn out to be false. This interpretation absolves Oppy of contradiction and renders him an unambiguous advocate of *Truth-conducive reasons*.

## II.1.2. Thoroughgoing coherentism

Showing that Oppy is committed to *Thoroughgoing coherentism* will take a bit more work, though at one point he seems plainly to affirm something similar explicitly: "every belief stands

11

or falls by coherence with the rest" (2006, 9). But here I want to show how this follows from his account of justification for philosophical opinions (Section II.3.1.):

> JUSTIFICATION: One's belief in a controversial philosophical opinion $B$ is justified if and only if one has satisfied oneself that a worldview one has developed that embeds $B$ trumps every extant worldview that embeds $\sim B$.

Though 'having satisfied oneself' is not standard epistemological vocabulary, fulfilling it presumably involves reasonably holding the following belief:

> TRUMPING: $B$-embedding worldview $W$ trumps every extant $W'$ that embeds $\sim B$

When and why might it be reasonable for a believer in $B$ to believe TRUMPING, by Oppy's lights? The answer is certainly not "when she has a good argument," both because controversial philosophical positions rarely if ever have arguments for them that are good by Oppy's standards, and because he denies the necessity of such arguments for justified belief: "In order to have a justified belief on a controversial philosophical opinion, … you simply do not need derivations with the controversial philosophical claim as conclusion" (2015, 330). Two other options are left: non-propositional entitlement or justification and worldview comparison. I consider both in order.

*1. Nonpropositional entitlement or justification.* Perhaps, having considered the pros and cons of $W$ and varieties of $W'$, it *just seems* to one without argument that TRUMPING is true. This would constitute an appeal to intuition or insight. What would Oppy make of that?

On the one hand, he emphatically rejects intuition or insight as unnecessary for steadfastness in disagreement (2010, 193–194) and irrelevant in worldview comparison (2015, 327; 2019c, 10–11). On the other hand, he argues that one may often reasonably continue to believe what one finds intuitive when the experts don't agree (2019c, 11):

> if you hold opinions where there is no established convergent expert opinion, then, even if you have none but intuitive support for your opinions, it may be that you have no reason to reconsider. In matters of philosophy, politics, and religion, it is hard to see any good reason why experts have greater entitlement to hold particular beliefs than those who are not experts.

One promising way to harmonize these two claims is to distinguish between a kind of epistemic entitlement and epistemic justification (cf., roughly, Wright 2004): say that one is entitled to a belief if one holds it and has no reason to reconsider it; and one's belief is justified if one has (good) reason to think it is true (cf. Section I.3.1.). One might then be entitled to an unjustified belief when one is not aware of any truth-conducive strategy for belief revision, as Oppy argues in cases of widespread disageement:

given that the goal of belief is to track the truth, we must take account of the fact… that there is no method open to us for aggregating our beliefs that we have reason to believe will increase the probability that we have true beliefs… where expert credences are distributed everywhere from zero to one, there just is nothing that recommends any particular revision of the credence of any given expert in the light of the credences of all of the other experts. (Oppy, 2011, 21)

Would Oppy accept this distinction between entitlement and justification? He often acknowledges another distinction between rational permissibility and rational obligation (e.g., Oppy 2019c, 13). Permissibility and entitlement seem to be the same idea; but justification and obligation aren't, because he believes that theistic and atheistic belief can be justified but there is not rational obligation to believe either. We would then have three increasingly strict levels of positive epistemic status: entitlement or permissibility, justification, and obligation. For Oppy, intuition is sufficient for the first; nothing feasible is sufficient for the third; and justification, at least on controversial matters, seems to require worldview comparison.[4]

There is a looming inconsistency: (1) belief one is merely entitled to seems to be supported just by intuition; (2) Oppy rejects the rationality of holding one's intuitions to be more reliable than those of others – so, where intuitions diverge, he wouldn't seem to approve of treating them as truth-conducive reasons; (3) yet, as we saw in the previous section, Oppy says that beliefs are oriented toward the truth, so that it is only permissible to hold them based on truth-conducive reasons.[5] This apparent inconsistency does not stem merely from my reconstruction, but largely from claims made by Oppy himself.

I suspect that Oppy makes a mistake both here and with respect to the judges case discussed in the previous section. The inference from the truth-tracking goal of belief and the

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[4] We find a similar view expounded by BonJour (2001, 52), who claims that there may be "cases in which it seems possible to fulfill one's epistemic duty without being epistemically justified." This argument from "epistemic poverty" runs the following way:

> It is certainly possible that the epistemic situation of some person or group of people, the kinds of evidence and cognitive tools and methods of inquiry available to them, might be so dire or impoverished as to make it difficult or impossible to come up with strong evidence or good epistemic reasons for beliefs about many important matters. In such a situation, it is far from clear that people who accept beliefs on less than adequate evidence or reasons or perhaps even on none at all, while still doing the best that they can under the circumstances, are guilty of any breach of their epistemic duty or can properly be described as epistemically blameworthy or irresponsible. One's primary epistemic duty, after all, includes both seeking the truth and avoiding error. To insist that people in such an unfortunate condition should accept only those few if any beliefs for which really good evidence or reasons are available, withholding judgment on everything else, is in effect to give the avoidance of error an absolute and unwarranted priority over the discovery of truth.

[5] Though *Truth-conducive reasons* is formulated in terms of justification, passages from Oppy quoted in the previous section seem to apply to rational permissibility – entitlement – as well.

unavailability of a knowably truth-conducive method of belief revision to reasonable entitlement is invalid. It does not follow that if the goal of belief is to track the truth, then only truth-conducive methods of belief revision can be rationally obligatory. When one has no reason to think that one's belief is true, then, given the truth-tracking goal of belief, it is entirely possible that there is an obligation for one to suspend belief even though that cannot increase the number of true beliefs one has.[6]

The alternative to the proposed harmonization is to suggest that Oppy is inconsistent and overly permissive in the passages quoted above, contradicting *Truth-conducive reasons*. I consider the consequences of rejecting *Truth-conducive reasons* in Section II.3.1. Either way, there is little *consistent* basis in Oppy's writings for TRUMPING being justified (or one being entitled to belief in it) nonpropositionally.

*2. Worldview comparison.* One might then suggest that the conditions for justified belief in TRUMPING are completely analogous to the ones for justified belief in *B*. These would turn out to be the following:

$1_T$. Having developed a worldview $W_T$ that embeds TRUMPING

$2'_T$. Having satisfied oneself that $W_T$ trumps every extant $W_T'$ that embeds ~TRUMPING

How might belief in the claim included in ($2'_T$) – that $W_T$ trumps every extant $W_T'$ that embeds ~TRUMPING – be justified? The answer, again, must be either non-propositional entitlement or justification – which Oppy may disfavor for reasons mentioned above – or worldview comparison, with a vicious regress looming in the latter case.

There may be a strange solution to the looming vicious regress: if $W$ and $W_T$ are identical. In the following, I will argue that they need to be. Recall that in the idealized sense, worldviews are supposed to be comprehensive so that any two non-identical ones contradict each other (Oppy 2017, 175–177). $W$ and $W_T$ would therefore have to be either contradictory or identical. Take first the possibility that they are contradictory. The first interesting cases here are if the two contradict on *B* ($W_T$ denies it) or TRUMPING (*W* denies it). Both cases seem self-defeating: how could a worldview confused enough to deny *B* but endorse the claim that a *B*-embedding worldview trumps all ~*B*-embedding ones play an important role in justifying *B*-belief? Similarly, how could *W* play an important role in justifying *B*-belief if it embeds ~TRUMPING – that is, the claim that some ~*B*-embedding worldviews are equal or superior?

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[6] My contention here implies that the "adequate grounds" conception of justification (cf. Alston 1985) can be subsumed under the deontological conception; therefore that the "permissibility without justification" conception of epistemic entitlement is wrong, and cases of "epistemic poverty" (cf. footnote 4) require belief suspension. This claim could be developed into an independent objection to some of Oppy's claims, but in the following I restrict myself to – what I hope is – a more central issue.

The other option, still considering the scenario where $W$ and $W_T$ contradict, is that they contradict not on $B$ or TRUMPING – they both embed these – but on some other point. In this case, it is hard to see the relevance of $W_T$ for the rationality of belief in $B$. $W$ already embeds $B$ and TRUMPING. $W_T$ might turn out to be better if one performs the kind of worldview comparison recommended by Oppy (cf. Section I.2.2), and the $B$-believer might then choose to adopt $W_T$ over $W$. But what role could considering a contrary worldview play in justifying TRUMPING given that one already accepts it?

On the other hand, if $W$ and $W_T$ are identical, then TRUMPING turns out to be part of $W$: it is part of the worldview to claim its own superiority. Note that this would get around the regress worry by embracing a kind of circularity or, minimally, self-reference. It turns out, then, that if belief in a controversial philosophical claim is to be justified by worldview comparison, the preferred worldview embedding the given claim needs to include a self-referential superiority claim.

One might object that a lot depends on my employing the idealized notion of worldview. Are we any better off if we try to parse Oppy's argument in terms of more realistic, less expansive worldviews? I doubt it. On the one hand, the regress problem would resurface: we'd need a third worldview to support the belief that $W_T$ trumps the ~TRUMPING-embedding worldviews, a fourth worldview to support the superiority of that third worldview, and so on *ad infinitum*. On the other hand, it is hard to imagine that any decent and reasonably well worked-out worldview that embeds TRUMPING doesn't embed $B$; and that any reasonably well worked-out worldview that denies $B$ embeds TRUMPING. So, a very close link remains, and the separation is at best unstable: upon some reflection and expansion, the two worldviews may fuse.

## II.2. Contradiction

Having argued that Oppy is committed to *Truth-conducive reasons* and *Thoroughgoing coherentism*, I will now argue that these two jointly imply that there cannot be any justified philosophical opinions. My argument takes the following form:

1. If *Thoroughgoing coherentism*, then beliefs about the comparative theoretical virtues of comprehensive worldviews are the only source of justification for philosophical opinions.

2. If beliefs about the comparative theoretical virtues of comprehensive worldviews are the only source of justification for philosophical opinions, then these beliefs constitute

15

at least some of one's reasons for one's philosophical opinions, and if those reasons cannot justify those opinions, then those opinions cannot be justified.

3. If *Thoroughgoing coherentism,* then the reasons constituted by beliefs about the comparative theoretical virtues of comprehensive worldviews are not truth-conducive.

4. If *Truth-conducive reasons*, then non-truth-conducive reasons cannot justify philosophical opinions.

5. Therefore, if *Truth-conducive reasons* and *Thoroughgoing coherentism*, then philosophical opinions cannot be justified.

In the following, I argue for the premises in some detail.

*Premise 1.* Recall that *Thoroughgoing coherentism* claims exclusive significance with regard to justification for beliefs about comparative theoretical virtue. It thus involves an *internalist* picture: one mental state is justified by another. Note also that the exclusive claim rules out any nonpropositional or nondoxastic mental states playing any justificatory role.

*Premise 2.* This premise is an awkward bridge between the different languages of the two Oppyan theses: one is put in terms of reasons and the other in terms of justification. The assumption that when a set of beliefs serves as the only source of justification, then those beliefs are one's reasons for belief seems fairly innocent. I see only one plausible way to question it, which invokes the distinction between propositional and doxastic justification.

This distinction is not an entirely straightforward one. It is supposed to distinguish between the grounds available for someone that would justify one's belief and the grounds on which one actually believes. This distinction renders intelligible the claim that one has justification to believe something one does not actually believe by interpreting said justification to pertain to the proposition, not the doxastic state (cf. Turri, 2010).

Applying the propositional–doxastic distinction, the objector might say the following: what follows from *Thoroughgoing coherentism* is that the *propositional justification* for philosophical opinions is exhausted by beliefs about the comparative theoretical virtues of worldviews, but one's reasons for belief concern one's doxastic justification – the reasons based on which one actually believes. A similar distinction might be invoked to say that even though the beliefs that in fact play a role in justification are the ones about the theoretical virtues of worldviews, one might wrongly take other beliefs into account when weighing what to believe, thereby treating those as reasons.

These distinctions might be sound; the objector might be right. But I don't think the objection is relevant. This is because Premise 2 is not about *all* reasons, just the ones with

justifying potential; and *Thoroughgoing coherentism* makes it clear that no beliefs other than ones concerning the relative theoretical virtues of worldviews play a role in justification. In other words, Premise 2 does not claim that beliefs about worldviews constitute all of one's reasons for belief; it claims that they constitute all of one's reasons that are candidates for being justifying reasons.

One worry remains: is it obvious that the way beliefs justify other beliefs is by being (taken as) reasons for them? It seems to me that in internalist contexts, the two are often used as synonyms or at least equivalents (e.g., Hasan & Fumerton 2022). Still, one may sense an intuitive difference. The strongest way to formulate the intuitive objection is to say that a support relation between propositions counts as a reason only if one has recognized it at some time – while one version of internalism, *access* internalism, denies that this is a requirement for justification. Even if this is right (I really don't know whether it is), Oppy's wording – one "ought to have satisfied" oneself about the superiority of one's preferred worldview – seems to require one's recognizing the connection, thereby qualifying the superiority-belief as a reason.

*Premise 3.* The meat of the argument, the most controversial contention, lies here. Comprehensive worldviews take positions on everything relevant to their assessment: the facts, the existence and properties of competing worldviews, the standards of theory evaluation and how the given worldview fares in their respect etc. Thus, the belief that a worldview is superior to its alternatives is not a further judgment or recognition one brings to the consideration: rather, it is just one step among many in cataloguing the worldview's claims. Accepting Oppy's criterion of justification, a worldview's commitment to its superiority is a mere aspect of its – epistemological or doxastic rather than logical – consistency; if one were to judge that the given worldview does *not* trump its alternatives, one would contradict the worldview.

To see the implications of this, consider the moment of judging a worldview superior to the other after some time of undecided reflection. If this judgment is justified, then, given *Thoroughgoing coherentism*, it is so in virtue of being embedded in a worldview. I've argued that this must be the very worldview under consideration. But in virtue of what does that worldview have the power to confer justification on one's judgment? Well, the Oppyan answer would be that that power derives from one's judgment that the worldview trumps to its competitors. As best I can tell, we've arrived at a very tight vicious circle of justification: justified belief in *p* (worldview superiority) is supposed to justify belief in *q* (the worldview), but justified belief in *p* requires justified belief in *q*. This is clearly unacceptable.

One wonders if this premise is a version of the alternative systems objection to more mainstream coherentism. There, the concern is that coherence is not truth-conducive because

very different (and contradictory) systems can be highly coherent. There is some resemblance to the issue here: it is true that very different worldviews can embed the claim that they trump the others. But for that to be clearly problematic, I had to appeal to the observation that *Thoroughgoing coherentism* rules out any *additional* support for the superiority claim beyond its inclusion in some worldview. I take it that coherentism isn't usually committed to the ideally comprehensive nature of worldviews as Oppy is, and therefore this version of the problem might be unique to his approach.

*Premise 4.* This premise is only included to make the argument clearly valid; it is merely a close paraphrase of *Truth-conducive reasons*.

In sum, the premises seem well-motivated; it isn't clear to me how one might plausibly avoid the force of the argument. I take it that the conclusion's consequent is unacceptable, and at any rate far from what Oppy would want to endorse. I will therefore move on to consider the options before the person who decides she has to deny one of the Oppyan principles.

## II.3. Alternatives

At this point, I depart from the strict confines of internal critique. Assume one is convinced by my argument that the combination of *Truth-conducive reasons* and *Thoroughgoing coherentism* has untenable skeptical consequences. What should one do – what is the best alternative epistemological picture? In this section, I briefly consider the implications of rejecting *Truth-conducive reasons* – yielding what I call epistemological relativism – and those of rejecting *Thoroughgoing coherentism* – whose negation is, broadly speaking, foundationalism. I shall argue that the latter is preferable; I will leave working out the details and implications of what I take to be the best version of foundationalism to the next chapter.

### II.3.1. Epistemological relativism

What would the implications of rejecting *Truth-conducive reasons* be? I suggest that a radical kind of epistemological relativism would ensue, where one recognizes that one's beliefs have no better claim to being true than incompatible alternatives, and where rationality either isn't involved in belief formation or is completely reoriented toward, say, pragmatic and normative considerations. This is more extreme than the kinds of epistemological relativism one might find in the literature, which claim that the relevant epistemic norms are relative to a community or a belief system (Lynch 2019). Perhaps it is indeed relative, in the sense of not publicly arbitrable, whether *Vipassana* meditation really provides insight into the truth of the no-self doctrine of Buddhism; but presumably those who take it to do so take it to furnish them with a

truth-conducive reason for said doctrine. The kind of epistemological relativism we're considering here denies the privileged relevance of such reasons.

I strongly doubt that this kind of epistemological relativism is feasible in psychological and conceptual senses. If I develop some kind of doxastic attitude toward a proposition *p* and do so for reasons I recognize are not truth-conducive, then either I engage in some form of self-delusion, or the doxastic attitude I take myself to develop is not one I take to be truth-aimed. But belief *is* a truth-aimed attitude: that's what distinguishes believing that *p* from other propositional attitudes such as imagining that *p* and pretending that *p* (Fassio 2015). This seems to be such a central feature of belief that this kind of epistemological relativism would likely involve a change in subject: we would no longer be talking about our beliefs and the norms guiding belief formation, but about some other doxastic states – preferences, fancies, wishes, perhaps. In the worse scenario, we would *call* these beliefs; in a clearer world, we'd just bracket the issue of belief or agree to suspend belief concerning philosophical issues.

It may be the case that something like the latter situation is taking place among metaphilosophers. I'm referring to the "acceptance without belief" approach to philosophical theories, which takes its inspiration from anti-realist attitudes toward scientific theories (Beebee 2018, 20–22; Barnett 2019). I don't want to critique this position other than to say that if one is still concerned to know what one should *believe*, consulting truth-conducive reasons might be a psychological and conceptual inevitability.

## II.3.2. Foundationalism

The other option is to reject *Thoroughgoing coherentism*. The claim is somewhat complex, so there are many ways to deny it. However, to avoid reproducing the problems that riddled *it*, preferable alternatives would need to reject the idea that epistemic evaluation concerns comprehensive worldviews, because, as we have seen, this collapses the evaluative judgment with the object of evaluation. Not to collapse evaluative judgment with the object of evaluation would seem to involve either infinitism or foundationalism. Infinitism is the view that if a belief is justified, it has an infinite regress of supporting beliefs; foundationalism is the view that some beliefs are justified in a way that does not require any further beliefs. In the following, I will ignore infinitism as a marginal and implausible view, though it has been defended occasionally. On the other hand, I think that some varieties of foundationalism – hereby motivated as the best alternative to Oppy's system – have important implications for the role of arguments and philosophical knowledge. In the next chapter, I turn to these varieties and their implications.

# III. THE IMPLICATIONS OF FOUNDATIONALISM

So far, I have argued that one should reject Oppy's doctrine of *Thoroughgoing coherentism* and embrace a version of foundationalism instead. In this chapter, I work out the implications of such a move. First, I argue that foundationalism largely undercuts Oppy's objections to "derivations" or arguments. Second, I consider the extent to which foundationalists can take their philosophical beliefs to be justified, because I take permissiveness to be an important part of Oppy's metaphilosophy of religion. Here, I'll argue for a modest kind of foundationalism that allows for more non-inferentially justified beliefs than classical versions of foundationalism do. I'll also consider how expert disagreement should impact the foundationalist's philosophical beliefs, especially in light of Oppy's discussion of the topic (cf. Section I.3.2.). I'll argue that steadfastness is harder to justify than Oppy makes it out to be (not just for foundationalists) but is nevertheless well motivated in some cases.

## III.1. The rehabilitation of arguments

Recall that Oppy defines a good argument as "one that succeeds – or perhaps would or ought to succeed – in bringing about reasonable belief revision in reasonable targets" (2006, 10). His chief objection to "derivations" or arguments is that they fail to achieve this for targets who endorse consistent worldviews that reject the given argument's conclusion. I will argue that foundationalists need not concede such failure.

The key phrase in Oppy's formulation is "reasonable." For the foundationalist, consistent worldviews are not all created equal: it might turn out that one's worldview denies a premise for which one has strong nonpropositional justification. In such cases, the rational response to encountering the argument would often be modifying one's worldview to accept that premise – and consequently, perhaps, the conclusion. If the interlocutor fails to do that, the foundationalist can uphold the goodness of her argument in one of two ways. She can either deny that her target is reasonable or say that though her argument does not (apparently) succeed, it nevertheless *ought to* – which appears to be adequate for Oppy's criterion (cf. Pruss 2007).

The obvious challenge here is whether the failure to persuade should make the foundationalist question the nonpropositional justification of her own basic beliefs. Oppy certainly seems to think so: "Given the symmetry of the situation, it would be the worst kind of special pleading to suppose that your intuitions carry more weight than do the intuitions of those on the other side" (2019c, 11). We'll consider this in the second part of the next section. Either way, the principal point stands: the foundationalist need not concede Oppy's structural argument for

the failure of derivations; what she *may* need to consider are the contingent and empirical facts about who believes what and why.

## III.2. The extent of justified philosophical belief

Oppy is remarkably optimistic when it comes to rationally justified philosophical belief. Here, my goal is to argue that the revision I've suggested – rejecting *Thoroughgoing coherentism* – may still allow for many philosophical beliefs to be justified, though probably less than Oppy would like. First, I shall outline what I take to be a plausible and fairly permissive (internalist and fallibilist) version of foundationalism: phenomenal conservatism. To support this view, I will give brief reasons to reject classical foundationalism and externalism. Second, I will argue that disagreement constitutes a serious problem for beliefs one takes to be justified nonpropositionally; and that it takes fairly special features for a theory to allow for rational steadfastness in the face of such disagreement.

### III.2.1. For phenomenal conservatism

Foundationalism is the view that some beliefs can be justified nonpropositionally.[7] Foundationalists differ as to the scope of these "basic" beliefs and the way(s) in which they may acquire justification. Here I'll briefly introduce and reject classical or infallibilistic foundationalism and externalism, and propose phenomenal conservatism instead.

Classical foundationalism is the doctrine that only indubitability-conferring or certainty-conferring nonpropositional features can justify beliefs; the central relevant feature advocated by classical foundationalists is *direct acquaintance* or *awareness* of something (usually some experience) and the correspondence between a proposition or concept and that thing (Hasan & Fumerton 2022, Section 2.2.). Few foundationalists today embrace this classical, infallibilistic picture. Here I go with the majority; in the following, I briefly expound on two objections that seem forceful to me.

First, skeptical consequences. Humean and Kantian considerations have convinced most philosophers that one is not directly acquainted with the external world beyond one's perceptual representations of it; and even if one is, this acquaintance is not certainty-conferring: the room

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[7] Some say "noninferentially," but I wonder if that succeeds in differentiating foundationalism from its main alternative, coherentism. Coherentism, too, agrees that (some) beliefs are not justified by being inferred from other beliefs, at least if we don't take all coherence relations to be inference relations. I take it that foundationalism's distinct claim is that some justification is *nonpropositional*: that there are some beliefs whose justification does not depend on their relations to other propositions.

for doubt is left wide open. Neither is it easy to infer ordinary beliefs from infallibly justified ones (if there are such):

> Most classical foundationalists reject the idea that one can have noninferentially justified beliefs about the past, but the present disappears into the past in the blink of an eye. How can one even hope to get back the vast body of knowledge one pre-philosophically supposes one has, if one's epistemic base is so impoverished? … One might be able to convince oneself that one can know noninferentially the principles of deductive reasoning, but deduction will not take one usefully beyond the foundations of knowledge and justified belief. … To advance beyond foundations we will inevitably need to employ non-deductive reasoning and … that will ultimately require us to have noninferential knowledge of propositions describing probability connections between evidence and conclusions that are not logically implied by the evidence. It is not absurd on the face of it to suppose that one can have noninferential *a priori* knowledge of probabilistic connections, but it is perhaps an understatement to say that the view is not popular… (Hasan & Fumerton 2022, Section 3.4.; cf. Plantinga 2000, 97–98)

Second, self-defeat. If belief in classical foundationalism is to be justified according to its own standard, either one needs to be directly aware of its truth, or it has to be derivable (even if not with certainty) from premises that are nonpropositionally justified beyond doubt. Few have claimed to be directly acquainted with classical foundationalism, and few have found attempted derivations (insofar as they exist) convincing – evidenced, among other things, by the unpopularity of classical foundationalism (cf. Plantinga 2000, 94–97).

In contrast with classical foundationalism, externalism is a very popular family of views concerning epistemic justification. Externalists claim that some conditions for justification are external – not necessarily accessible – to the knower's mind. Typically, externalists set the bar low when it comes to internal conditions, yielding the result that given a certain metaphysical optimism (i.e., that no skeptical scenario obtains), justified belief is fairly common.

In the following, I don't intend to criticize externalism. Rather, I want to suggest – following many others (e.g., Alston 2005, 26–27; Chalmers 2011, 533) – that the disagreement between internalists and externalists is (at least) partly verbal – that they are sometimes talking about different things, and that there is *one* sense of justification that is clearly internalist. Instead of arguing against externalism, then, I'll do my best to point to this clearly internalist notion of justification.

This notion concerns *how to think* – what some have called the "guidance-deontological" conception. The idea is that there are certain rules or laws of reasonable thought – akin to a deontological conception of morality – and to be justified is to have followed these rules of thought conscientiously; to be "in the right" with respect to them. Some might argue that this

kind of justification is not necessary or sufficient for knowledge, or not what is most often picked out by the ordinary use of "justification," and I won't object – but I insist that it is both reasonably clear and obviously important. It is fairly clear (though not uncontroversial, cf. Goldman 1999; Williams 2016) that this guidance-deontological justification must be an internalist notion. Rules are useless if one cannot know whether one is following them; an inaccessible book of laws might ground evaluation, but it cannot, in the practical sense, offer *guidance*.

So far, I've argued against classical foundationalism and for internalism (in a sense). This is still not a full account; I haven't said what beliefs I take to be justified nonpropositionally. There aren't many theories of modest internalist foundationalism, and I take the best candidate to be *phenomenal conservatism* (Huemer 2007). According to phenomenal conservatism, there is a *sui generis* phenomenal experience called *seeming* (i.e., to be true), and one is nonpropositionally justified in what seems true to one.

Two qualifications. First, justification in this picture comes in degrees: perhaps in some cases, seemings confer some justification but not enough for rational belief. This is plausibly the case when both of two inconsistent claims seem true to us. It's not entirely clear whether there's a threshold or a cutoff point beyond which one should believe; Huemer (2007) seems not to endorse one but rather assign degrees to belief as well. That is a controversial position (cf. Moon 2017).

Second, one needs to settle on a hierarchy between the role of seemings and that of other considerations, such as counterevidence and undercutting defeat. One approach says that seemings have the final say: if, after considering all the counterevidence and every undercutting defeater, *p* still seems true to me, then I'm justified in believing that *p*. The other approach treats seemings more as a source of evidence than as a particularist arbiter of justification (though it might still be the arbiter of justification by virtue of adjudicating among possible general epistemic principles). On this view, counterevidence and undercutting defeaters could render a belief unjustified even if it continues to seem true to one.

I favor the latter view, though I'm not sure how to argue for it, other than by reporting that I find the former much too lenient. My preference will influence my discussion of persuasive failure and disagreement in the following section in that I don't take mere appeals to continued seeming-to-be-true to be sufficient for deflecting said concerns (*contra* Huemer 2011). People who take the former approach may not find anything disagreeable in the subsequent discussion, but they might find it superfluous.

How much philosophical belief does phenomenal conservatism allow to be justified? I address this question in two steps: *prima facie* justified beliefs and beliefs that remain justified

in the face of potential defeaters from disagreement. I'll address the former briefly and then the latter in the following section at greater length.

When it comes to *prima facie* justification, phenomenal conservatives can have justified philosophical beliefs if (1) they seem true to them (say, in thought experiments),[8] or (2) they are ultimately[9] justified by beliefs that seem true to them. These seem to cover most of the ground upon which philosophers actually claim to believe various philosophical positions and reflects the typical features of arguments made in philosophical papers (cf. Oppy's characterization in Section I.1.). After all, what *other* reasons might philosophers base their positions on? Phenomenal conservatism is thus quite permissive with respect to *prima facie* justification.

## III.2.2. Disagreement

Finally, I want to consider the impact of disagreement on philosophical beliefs assuming phenomenal conservatism. I will set address Oppy's discussion of the topic later, hoping to frame the issues in a clearer way first. In this section, I outline a few reasons why many philosophers think that (peer or expert) disagreement often gives one reason to doubt one's views; I then argue that only those bundles of philosophical positions end up justified in the face of disagreement which imply both first-order and higher-order asymmetry in the epistemic standing of disagreeing parties. In earlier work, I've developed similar views in detail (Békefi 2021, Ch. 3; 2022b; forthcoming). Here, I give an updated and condensed argument for a slightly more ambitious claim: that certain "epistemically self-favoring" features in theories are not just sufficient, but necessary, for steadfastness.

First, the skeptical consequences of peer and expert disagreement can be supported from two perspectives: instrumentalist and explanationist. The instrumentalist perspective recommends that we treat the deliverances of our cognitive faculties the way we treat readouts of measurement devices. When the readouts of such devices disagree, one can trust one over the other only if one has (prior or independent) reason to think that one is more reliable than the other (Pittard 2019). The canonical illustration of this intuition is the "mental math" or "restaurant bill" case. Here it is in Christensen's formulation (2007, 193):

> Suppose that five of us go out to dinner. It's time to pay the check, so the question we're interested in is how much we each owe. We can all see the bill total clearly, we all agree to give a 20 percent tip, and we further agree to split the

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[8] See, for example, Bogardus's defense of substance dualism, wherein he argues that we ought to believe dualism because it is intuitive and undefeated (Bogardus 2013a).

[9] "Ultimately," because there may often be a chain of beliefs, each justified by the one after it, that ends with a nonpropositionally justified one. More realistically, there is a complex network of beliefs and (asymmetrical, noncircular) support relations, but the general point stands: all chains terminate at nonpropositionally justified beliefs.

whole cost evenly, not worrying over who asked for imported water, or skipped desert, or drank more of the wine. I do the math in my head and become highly confident that our shares are $43 each. Meanwhile, my friend does the math in her head and becomes highly confident that our shares are $45 each. How should I react, upon learning of her belief?

I think that if we set the case up right, the answer is obvious. Let us suppose that my friend and I have a long history of eating out together and dividing the check in our heads, and that we've been equally successful in our arithmetic efforts: the vast majority of times, we agree; but when we disagree, she's right as often as I am. So for the sort of epistemic endeavor under consideration, we are clearly peers. Suppose further that there is no special reason to think one of us particularly dull or sharp this evening—neither is especially tired or energetic, and neither has had significantly more wine or coffee. And suppose that I didn't feel more or less confident than usual in this particular calculation, and my friend reports that she didn't either. If we set up the case in this way, it seems quite clear that I should lower my confidence that my share is $43 and raise my confidence that it's $45. In fact, I think (though this is perhaps less obvious) that I should now accord these two hypotheses roughly equal credence.

Moving on, the explanationist perspective urges one to consider what the best explanation of a given disagreement is. When the other party is one's epistemic superior (and one is not aware that the experts disagree with one another), then the best explanation is usually that one is missing something: either some evidence or some evidence-assessment skills. When the other party is one's epistemic peer (or one is aware that the experts disagree), then the best explanation is usually that non-truth-tracking factors play an important role in the formation of one's beliefs, and this is often seen as reason to decrease one's confidence in those beliefs (Levy 2021; Bernáth & Tőzsér 2021).

If we grant these considerations, then those who want to retain their original confidence in their philosophical beliefs in the face of apparent peer and expert disagreement need to have some reason to think that – and/or an explanation for why – those who disagree with them are not in fact their epistemic peers or superiors. Call this first-order asymmetry.[10]

Such reasons and explanations come in many varieties. Consider, first, the constituents of epistemic standing or competence. These can be divided into two categories: "evidential procession" and "evidential processing" (Matheson 2015, 2). The former involve (among other

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[10] Some argue that one can reasonably believe that others are her peers yet they and not her have made a mistake in reasoning in a given specific case (cf. Arsenault & Irving 2012; Bogardus 2013b). I think this either is an unstable position (cf. Békefi 2021, Sections 3.2., 3.3.) or pertains to a different, broader conception of epistemic standing (cf. Gressis 2021).

things) memory, education, and some controversial sources of evidence like religious experience and evidence tied to a particular social standpoint. The latter include intelligence, carefulness of thinking in general and on a particular occasion, and various biases or lack thereof.

When one claims epistemic superiority, one must give a reason or an explanation for believing that one has better evidence or that one has been better at evaluating said evidence (or, equally, that one's interlocutor is inferior on either count). The person of faith can claim to have religious experiences as evidence unavailable to her atheist interlocutor; the atheist interlocutor can accuse her of cultural influences conditioning and clouding her judgment. These are some first-order claims to asymmetry.

Some have argued that such reasons and explanations are sufficient to secure steadfastness (Bergmann 2009; Arsenault & Irving 2012); but others have raised strong objections to these positions (Matheson 2015, 5–6; Christensen 2018, 219–221). The essence of the problem is that the disagreement resurfaces concerning the reasons and explanations offered to support one's epistemic superiority. This seems to undermine one's defenses and to give one reason once again to lose confidence in one's disputed position.[11]

Here's an ordinary and a spookier illustration. For the ordinary case, consider a calculation on paper where one could fail to carry the 1 at multiple places. I almost make this mistake once and calculate what my mistaken solution would have been. You make almost make the mistake at another place in the calculation and work out what your mistaken solution would have been. When I inform you of my answer and you tell me yours, I remain steadfast because you told me just the number I would have reached with the error I nearly avoided. However, when you tell me that you would have come up with *my* number had you made the error *you* avoided, I lose much of my confidence, unless I antecedently consider myself better at calculating than you.[12]

A spooky case: a Christian and a Buddhist meet. Both were raised in their religions, but both are confident that their religion is correct because of religious experiences they've had: the Christian, while singing hymns; the Buddhist, while practicing insight meditation. When first meeting, they remain steadfast in their faith, recalling their unique private evidence. But suppose they find an agreed-upon way to quantify the evidential force they take their experiences to have ("It's as if the clouds spelled 'Christianity/Buddhism' is true!") and discover that they

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[11] Closely related to this consideration is the so-called "independence condition" for reasons to demote, i.e., that one's reasons for considering one's interlocutor epistemically inferior cannot depend on the assumption that one is right on the very issue currently under dispute (cf. Christensen 2007, 198–205).

[12] Inspired by Christensen (2018, 220).

have similar strength. Without further reason to discount each other's testimony, they would likely have reason to decrease their confidence.[13]

What is needed, then, for stable steadfastness is a kind of reason or explanation for epistemic superiority that applies equally to higher-order disagreements as well. If the Buddhist antecedently thought that the Christian would be unable to quantify reliably the force of his religious experience, then she could have remained steadfast without any irrationality.

I propose that belief in some contested claim $p$ is immune to peer and expert disagreement if there is a domain of epistemic competences $D$ with respect to $p$ such that it meets the following criteria:

1. If $p$ is true, then finding out the truth about $p$ depends on $D$.
2. If $p$ is true, then correctly assessing the disagreeing parties' relative epistemic standing with respect to $p$ depends on $D$.
3. If $p$ is true, then those who deny $p$ are epistemically inferior with respect to $D$ to those who accept $p$.

To claim that someone who believes that $p$ would need to lose much of his confidence in such a disagreement, one would need to subscribe to a very strong version of *conciliationism* that arguably has widespread skeptical consequences. This is because in the relevant cases, one would have *no positive reason* to think one is wrong – given (3), a $p$-independent assessment of their relative standing with respect to $D$ could not be assigned privileged significance – rather, one would encounter little more than the mere possibility.

Are there any examples of such $p$–$D$ combinations? The most likely candidates are moral, political, and religious claims where disagreement tends to be wide-ranging – sometimes called "deep" – and the ways one conceives of the domain-relevant competences intertwined with the first-order positions one takes. The instance I've studied the most is traditional Christian faith (cf. Pittard 2014; Békefi, forthcoming), but there is reason to think there are several others (Turnbull, 2021).[14]

Consider serious moral disagreement as a further example (cf. Vavova 2014). It is plausible that the reliability of one's moral judgments corresponds with one's moral character and is evidenced by one's moral positions. It follows that when one considers one's interlocutor to be in serious moral error, one will have reason to think that he is epistemically inferior if one is

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[13] This paragraph reiterates a point from Békefi (2021, Section 3.3.1.).

[14] On the other hand, as the illustration about the Christian's and the Buddhist's encounter above illustrates, it is not at all automatic that religious disagreements qualify for this steadfastness-permitting category.

right; and one will have no reason to think that dispute-independent considerations are reliable guides to competences in the contested area. If we substitute "abortion is wrong" for *p* and "moral competences" for *D* in the above three criteria, they appear to be met:

1. If abortion is wrong, then finding out the truth about whether abortion is wrong depends on moral competences.
2. If abortion is wrong, then correctly assessing the disagreeing parties' relative epistemic standing with respect to whether abortion is wrong depends on moral competences.
3. If abortion is wrong, then those who deny that abortion is wrong are epistemically inferior with respect to moral competences to those who accept that abortion is wrong.

It is not clear that all disagreements over abortion are "deep" disagreements; perhaps one can become persuaded that one's interlocutor does indeed possess the requisite competence. The kinds of disagreements that are most stable in not demanding conciliation are the ones where the competences are claimed not to be detectable independently of one's position on the disputed matter – where they are "opaque" (Pittard 2014, 90). I *suspect* that these usually involve some supernatural factor, though disputes where standpoint epistemology is heavily implicated might also qualify.

The upshot is fairly radical: only beliefs that imply peculiar claims about domain-specific epistemic competences and how to assess them are resistant to the challenges of disagreement. Only these beliefs, that is, and ones that fall under their influence: either by relying on them for their justification or by belonging to the same domain of allegedly-superior epistemic competences.

## III.3. Oppy's objections to epistemic demotion

I've been suggesting that the best way for someone to remain rationally steadfast in one's philosophical views is by rooting them in a claim that renders one epistemically superior (on both first-order and higher-order levels) to those that reject said claim – or, from the other perspective, that epistemically "demotes" one's interlocutors. Oppy has three objections to similar suggestions: first, that all this is unnecessary, because steadfastness is much cheaper; second, that such claims are *a priori* implausible and therefore would need immense support to accept; and third, that if one were to believe such a thing, then one would have no reason to engage in argument with those who lack what one believes is the right epistemic equipment. I now turn to address these objections.

## III.3.1. The superfluity objection

First, Oppy claims that appeals like the one developed in the previous section are not necessary for steadfastness, and therefore the whole ordeal is unmotivated:

> Once we have overcome the temptation to think that we *need* to appeal to insight or righteous inner glow in order to justify expert maintenance of belief in the face of expert disagreement, it seems to me that we have simply lost any motivation to postulate such things. (Oppy 2011, 23)

In response, I'll argue that Oppy's three reasons (summarized in Section I.3.2.) are in most cases inadequate to justify steadfastness.

First, the complicated nature of our justifications for our philosophical positions. Oppy's characterization is doubtless correct, but I don't think it helps much. Others have equally complicated histories and reasons – compared to them, we're correct by luck at best. Moreover, even if we can rarely judge that one is our *exact* epistemic equal, most of us can confidently point to epistemic superiors who disagree with us (epistemic superiors, that is, in domains unaffected by the considerations discussed in the previous section). Finally, phenomenal conservatism directs our attention to the role of nonpropositionally justified beliefs in supporting our philosophical views; with these beliefs, appeals to the complexity of reasons and evidence are less likely to persuade.

Second, the non-obligatory nature of belief suspension. In earlier parts of the thesis, I've disputed this on two counts. For one, in Section II.1.2., I argued that a deontological conception of justification combined with the truth-tracking goal of belief may jointly imply an obligation to suspend judgment on a belief when one has no truth-conducive reasons for it. It seems very implausible to say that when my total evidence renders $p$ and $\sim p$ equiprobable, I'm rationally permitted to literally *choose* what to believe. For another, in Section II.3.1., I argued that since belief is truth-aimed, there is a limit to how much risk it can bear psychologically and conceptually, lest it become confused with preference or pretense. In sum, I see good reason to question Oppy's claim that belief suspension is never mandatory.

Third, the argument from diverse expert credences: if one decides to suspend belief, there will be experts who argue that *that* betrays an incorrect assessment of the evidence: some of them think that belief or disbelief is called for. Two objections. On the one hand, this line of thought seems to prove too much: one could never gain a good reason to change one's position as long as one is aware of diverse expert credences, and this seems implausible. On the other hand, if this is one's only consideration motivating steadfastness, it requires a troubled psychological state where one holds firm to one's initial doxastic attitude while also believing it to be

very likely mistaken. Returning to an earlier point, I doubt that it is correct to treat belief and suspension of belief completely equally; it seems to me that suspicions of error are more destabilizing for the former than for the latter.

## III.3.2. The implausibility objection

Second, the objection about how implausible it is to attribute irrationality to those who reject one's preferred argument:

> At least sometimes, people who refuse to accept the conclusion of an argument that is presented to them are merely manifesting irrationality; so a measure of the worth of an argument can't be taken directly from the rate of success that the argument has in persuading those who did not previously accept the conclusion of the argument to change their minds. Nonetheless, it is surely the case that, if there are many people who do not accept the claim that *p*, and if almost none of those people is persuaded to change his or her mind when presented with a given argument for the conclusion that *p*, then it would take an enormously strong supporting argument – concerning the lack of rationality of all those people – in order to overthrow the conclusion that the argument in question is plainly no good. (Oppy 2006, 13; cf. 2011, 23)

One might imagine the dialectic in the following way. Take two worldviews: *W* and *W\**. *W\** makes every claim that *W* does, but in addition claims that those who reject it are irrational. Suppose we perform an Oppy-style worldview comparison on the two: it will follow that they equal in explanatory power but *W\** makes an additional ambitious claim and is therefore inferior in theoretical simplicity, rendering *W* the preferable worldview. (Here we're thinking of worldviews in a non-comprehensive sense to avoid the problem developed in Ch. 2.)

In response, I want to argue that our consideration of disagreement above implies that the most theoretically virtuous (by Oppy's standards) worldview is not always the one that should be believed. It is a datum for both *W* and *W\** that most people reject it. What is the explanation? Surely it cannot be that they are false, on pain of incoherence. One of these two explanations seems inevitable: (1) either it's just very hard to find out the truth about *W* or *W\**, and those who succeed got lucky, or (2) those who reject *W* or *W\** are missing important evidence or some evidence-assessing skills. As I've argued, (1) is insufficient for securing steadfastness in disagreement. *W* therefore turns out to be highly epistemologically unstable – with some overstatement, *unbelievable*. Though I maintain that this is an implication of the problem of disagreement, it is not *unique* to disagreement: other concerning epistemological consequences might imply the same. In philosophy of religion, putative examples include Plantinga's evolutionary argument against naturalism (Plantinga 2011, Ch. 10.) and the divine deception objection to religious skeptical theism (Perrine 2023, Section 5.4.).

Can we save Oppy's scheme by considering believability as a datum? I don't think so, because *W* is committed to the believability of *W*, while *W\** is committed to the believability of *W\**. This is not a shared commitment. I take the upshot to be that Oppy-style theoretical virtues are not sufficient to determine believability, because some theoretically virtuous worldviews might turn out to be unbelievable. There is a kind of transcendental limit on metaphysical beliefs.

### III.3.3. The pointlessness objection

The third objection is about how, given such an outlook, there is no point in arguing:

> If A supposes that people who do not believe that *p* are, *ipso facto*, irrational – and, in particular, that such people are *ipso facto* irrational when it comes to the question of whether that *p* – then it is a pointless and empty performance to go on producing arguments with the conclusion that *p*, since there is no possible target for those arguments. (2006, 14)

This is a good objection. Anyone who – or any theory that – subscribes to a claim about the epistemic inferiority of those who disagree will have to give an account of the point of offering arguments. But since the claim that those who disagree with a position are (in some sense) irrational does not entail that such irrationality is *incorrigible*, giving such an account is by no means impossible. I'll give two examples by way of illustration: psychoanalysis and reformed epistemology.[15]

An advocate of psychoanalysis might claim that those who reject psychoanalytic interpretations of psychological phenomena – say, dreaming or misspeaking – are subject to irrational repressions: they don't recognize the correctness of these interpretations because, mostly subconsciously, they don't want to face the implications. When interacting with such a patient, the psychoanalyst may still try to point out the explanatory virtues of her theories and interpretations, and the patient might eventually budge and concede that he had been repressing his sense of agreement with the claims out of a fear of the implications. The claim is not that he is essentially unable to recognize the correctness of psychoanalysis, just that as long as he doesn't, he is behaving or thinking irrationally.

The second example is reformed epistemology (cf. Békefi 2022a; forthcoming). "Reformed epistemology" is sometimes used to denote the narrow thesis that belief in God can be rational without support from arguments; a broader sense invokes a theological framework involving metaphysical claims about human reasoning capacities. Here I'm referring to the latter

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[15] I take the suggestion that psychoanalysis and reformed epistemology have epistemological similarities from Szalai (2005, 151).

sense. Reformed theologians have claimed that people who reject the existence of God are subject to mind-clouding consequences of human sin – as is everybody else apart from gracious supernatural intervention. The role of arguments could then said to be twofold: either to question the rationality of atheistic belief by shedding light on its consequences (i.e., the rejection of initially plausible – perhaps nonpropositionally justified – premises in theistic arguments), or to serve as an occasion for said supernatural intervention (Sudduth 2009, 141–142).

Note one upshot of these examples: while appealing to private evidence or contested but fundamental ways of knowing (Lynch 2019) might justify steadfastness, they may not furnish the person believing on their basis with a reason to give arguments for their position. Arguing assumes that the other person either has or can obtain by way of argument the relevant evidence, and that the deficiencies in assessing the evidence either can be overcome or are consistent with a favorable outcome.

# CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I shall retrace my steps taken in this thesis and summarize my central contentions. I'll also make a couple comments on the place of my thesis in broader discussions.

In Chapter I, I introduced Graham Oppy's critique of arguments, his scheme for worldview comparison, and his epistemological outlook. The problem with arguments is that they cannot bring about reasonable belief revision in consistent targets; Oppy recommends worldview comparison instead, which involves judgments of comparative theoretical simplicity and explanatory power. It is unclear how this is supposed to be more persuasive, but, strictly speaking, Oppy doesn't claim that it is. In epistemology, Oppy attributes worldview considerations an important role in justification, which we found to be problematic in the next chapter. I also outlined his permissive attitude with respect to disagreement, which I reconsidered in Chapter III.

In Chapter II, I developed a dilemma for Oppy's framework. I argued that he is committed both to the claim that only truth-conducive reasons can justify and that only judgments about the theoretical virtues of worldviews justify. I argued these two are inconsistent, because, given his positions, judgments about the theoretical virtues of worldviews can only have viciously circular justification. I recommended that of the two commitments we reject what I called "thoroughgoing coherentism," and turn to a version of foundationalism instead. At this point, my evaluation of Oppy turned into a constructive elaboration of what I see as the most preferable alternative. This is justified by the fact that Oppy's contentions in Chapter I call for a solution, even if one finds his lacking.

In Chapter III, I developed and defended my preferred approach in greater detail. I argued that foundationalism in general vindicates arguments against Oppy's critique in principle, because it renders some premises privileged in virtue of being nonpropositionally justified. I then argued for two specifications of foundationalism: first, that its best version is phenomenal conservatism (a modest internalist account), and second, that resilience in the face of disagreement isn't cheap. Only beliefs with asymmetric implications for domain-specific epistemic competences, and further beliefs which belong to those domains are such that they can be held with steadfastness. Finally, I answered objections to this account which I gleaned from Oppy's comments on similar proposals.

In these last paragraphs, I would like to put the contentions of the thesis in two broader contexts. First, metaphilosophy. Recent discussions about philosophical progress, the goal of philosophy, and the credibility of philosophical views in light of persistent expert disagreement

have tended to give rise to two kinds of views: on the one hand, optimistic and self-assured parties have claimed not to see what the real problem is and have argued for their right to remain confident in regarding their philosophical positions as established knowledge. On the other hand, many philosophers have (more or less) conceded arguments for philosophical skepticism, though some try to give it nicer names. They tend to think that what philosophy is actually good at is the development of theories or systems of views that cohere well and are not worse than any other theories or systems.[16] My proposed approach could be seen as a middle way: isolated philosophical theses rarely have highly defeater-resistant justification, but *some* theories or systems of views have epistemological implications that allow for steadfastly justified belief in their truth.

Second, disenchantment and the role of reason. Analytic philosophers tend to be terrible at intellectual history, so I'll keep it short. Sociologists and continental philosophers since Max Weber have been talking about the modern shift from a supernatural view of the world where anomalous and inscrutable factors (partly attributable to disembodied agents) influence everyday life, to a rationalistic view where objective and methodical reason is in principle capable of uncovering every part of reality. This shift has been called *disenchantment* (Entzauberung) (Weber 1917/2004, 13; Jenkins 2000). My arguments against coherentism, classical foundationalism, and easy ways to steadfastness constitute an indirect critique of this neutral view of reason. If the positions that lend themselves to steadfast justified belief make often-spooky claims about consistent but undetectable differences in epistemic competence between those who believe the position and those who reject it, then philosophical knowledge requires something close to a reenchantment of reason.

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[16] For an overview of these trends see Tőzsér (2023, Chs. 4–6).

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